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The Golden Age

Those in the Diocese of Iowa who hoped for a continuation of help from the East controlled the special convention called to the Davenport Cathedral, December 9, 1874. They effected the election of the Rev. Henry C. Potter of New York City, who promptly wired his regrets. Still hopeful, the convention promptly chose the Rev. W. R. Huntington of Worcester, Massachusetts, and adjourned before word of his rejection could come. Both men had futures before them in the East, and only highly hopeful or sadly ignorant men could have expected either to accept election from an embarrassed diocese.

When the annual convention met at Cedar Rapids in May, 1875, to sandwich in its business between ballots for bishop, the picture had changed decisively. Dr. Charles H. Seymour, an effective rector of St. John's in Dubuque, had the support of a slender but determined minority of the laymen. Dr. James H. Eccleston of Philadelphia was the choice of a somewhat larger and equally determined majority of the clergy.

The issue was primarily between High Churchmanship and Evangelicalism. When, in the course of the balloting, Dr. Seymour withdrew, his sup-

porters found other candidates of his persuasion. On the sixteenth formal ballot, Dr. Eccleston gained a one vote majority in the laity while holding his clerical vote. He was declared bishop-elect, but he, too, declined to serve.

When the annual convention of 1876 came together at Des Moines, a compromise had been arranged, through the surrender of the discredited Evangelicals. The Rev. William Stevens Perry of Geneva, New York, president of Hobart College, historiographer of the Episcopal Church, and long an active participant in Episcopal administration and politics, was elected on the first ballot with only nominal opposition.

Bishop Perry, then in his forty-fifth year, was a scholarly, cultured High Churchman with no antagonism to Anglo-Catholicism or Ritualism. He thought quietly that Evangelicalism was dead. His interests in history had made him tolerant, and had also drawn him away from the type of thinking natural to most of his new flock in Iowa. He had no sound understanding of the nature or the magnitude of the task awaiting him, and at no time was he able to think of the duties of a bishop of Iowa as his chief concern. He was always more at home out of the state than in it.

He was not, however, an ineffective bishop. Though, as has been said, somewhat aloof from the people whom he served, Bishop Perry sensed correctly the ways in which Episcopalianism must

present its case and the reasons it must advance for survival. Though Protestantism, especially in the West, was largely committed to an insistence on a "conversion experience," individual Protestants had grown skeptical of the necessity and even the validity of a sudden change of heart under emotional stress. The absurdity of training a child in good morals and sound religion in infancy and telling him on his approach to early adolescence that he was a vile sinner had been pointed out by Horace Bushnell long before. Bishop Perry, who had no qualms on "regenerate" in the baptismal service, was ready to proclaim that Anglicans had held what Bushnell had found.

Furthermore, as a humane student of history, Bishop Perry knew that religious feeling could be disciplined and developed. Already mild interest in satisfactory ritual was apparent in many people whose attachment to Protestantism was by no means secure. By using its liturgy sensibly, the Episcopal Church could attract such waverers. And its teaching on sacramental grace could be appreciated by many Americans under the influence of quiet thought, broader acquaintance with the world, and a more sympathetic understanding of the practices of older churches.

Bishop Perry understood very inadequately, if he understood at all, certain forces against which he and his Church must fight. The movement toward interdenominational activity was gaining

strength. An increasing number of educated individuals were becoming more aware in an inchoate fashion that biological science and biblical criticism were cutting into literalist views of Christianity. The interest in reform movements, which had begun before the Civil War and had been seized on by Charles G. Finney and others as a proper exercise for Christian converts, had increased steadily. Many individuals were regarding Christianity in practical terms as a movement to do good to others largely by saving them from vice or by freeing them from political corruption or by creating for them opportunities for culture and recreation. To persons affected by such lines of thought, destined to gain an increasing hold on "superior" people, a faith that stressed a historic Church and a sacramental approach to God would present difficulties. The appreciation of the nature and extent of these difficulties was not given to many Episcopal clergy.

Bishop Perry's first task was to take stock of the assets and the liabilities of his diocese and to see what could be done about utilizing the former and liquidating the latter. This initial duty he performed on the whole adequately and tactfully.

He found that he had within the diocese some twenty parishes capable of supporting clergymen and experiencing growth. These parishes he cultivated with satisfactory results. He found a grave laxity among certain clergy. These he soon

deposed, being aided perhaps by his experience as a college president. He found the incomplete Cathedral satisfactory as it was — the tower was and still is missing — and raised no more funds for it. He felt that Griswold College might grow if support came from the entire West. Presently it was the official college of the province, a promotion that helped little. Bishop Perry also considered the idea of making it a branch of the State University of Iowa.

Meantime he worked on his *History of the American Episcopal Church, 1587-1883*, a magnificent two-volume work published in 1885. He also found time to make visits abroad, where he was received in the homes of the nobility and even of royalty.

Not all of the diocese liked his proceedings, but he did add prestige to the Church and, when better times came with the eighties, the Church grew. In that rapid growth, the set of the times helped greatly. Most churches grew then in Iowa. The Congregationalists, for instance, call the period 1875-1905 their "Golden Age." The golden age of the Episcopal Church ended sooner. Its banner year was probably 1892.

How much of the paper strength shown then was real, no one can say. But since Bishop Perry's day, the Episcopal Church has not regained the noteworthy numbers of 102 parishes and missions and 56 clergy that it showed in the early nineties.

The Panic of 1893 hurt all Iowa. Bishop Perry added to the troubles which the Episcopal Church shared with its neighbors by a lamentable ineptness in money matters. He struggled through five dismal years, in which his Church did not recover as others did. On May 13, 1898, after a breakdown the year before, he died rather suddenly at Dubuque without having restored the golden age of the Episcopal Church in Iowa.

M. F. CARPENTER